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SUBJECT: MEDIA REACTION ON MIDDLE EAST

Summary

-- Lead stories in all papers today, August 9, highlight a variety of regional and domestic developments on all fronts, such as the continued crisis regarding the Iraqi constitution, the escalation between the United States and Iran over Iran's nuclear program, preparations for Israel's withdrawal from Gaza.

Editorial Commentary

-- "What comes after the withdrawal: peace or annexing?"

Chief Editor Taher Udwan writes on the back-page of independent, mass-appeal Arabic daily Al-Arab Al-Yawm (08/09): "We welcome that time when the occupation ends and vacates the realms of the Gaza Strip. It is going to be a great occasion because it means that Israel was forced to withdraw for the first time from the land of Palestine.. There is a but here though, and that is the fear that Arab countries and other countries of the world will consider the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza as being peace between the Israelis and the Palestinians, whereby any Palestinian demands or national struggles or resistance that come at a later stage would be portrayed as objecting to that peace or rejecting the available opportunity, which would mean that Sharon will have succeeded in partitioning the solution from the cause. During his latest visit to Paris, Sharon was quoted as saying: 'Arabs talk about withdrawal from Gaza. I am talking about annexing the West Bank'. This is very serious talk, despite the fact this is nothing new in terms of the Israeli Prime Minister's views and ideas. The seriousness of this talk lies in the fact that it marks a Sharon-like plan that has already been being implemented on the ground for years with one objective in mind, namely annexing more than 40% of the West Bank.. Politicians must not belittle another very important phenomenon that is apparent. Sharon is not withdrawing from Gaza as a result of a peace agreement with the Palestinians, but as a unilateral decision. The seriousness of this phenomenon lies in the fact that this could constitute the beginning of saying that there is no Palestinian 'match' or 'partner' in the negotiations.. The anticipated withdrawal from Gaza must be accompanied by a Palestinian and Arab campaign on the political and media levels to declare the following: first, the demand for a complete and comprehensive withdrawal from the West Bank up to the June 4 borders; second, the refusal to pay a political price to Sharon, such as Arab recognition and normalization with the State of Israel; and third, the need for Arab countries to stop their diplomacy meetings with the Sharon government to discuss the Palestinian issue as long as this government refuses to return to the negotiating table."

-- "The alternatives to the occupation"

Daily columnist Tarek Masarweh writes on the back-page of semi-official, influential Arabic daily Al-Rai (08/09): "The main thing is ending the occupation of every inch of Palestine, be that through negotiations or a unilateral decision, as is happening now with the withdrawal from Gaza. There is no point in the selectiveness that some Palestinians and Arabs are exercising when they say that the withdrawal is going to turn Gaza into a huge prison, as if it were Switzerland under occupation! There is international conviction that Israel's occupation is not in the interest of the region, nor the superpowers' nor even Israel's.. We have a withdrawal, and this means that the withdrawal is not just from Gaza, but also from a very important part of the north of the West Bank,

meaning that the borders with Egypt are going to be Palestinian borders with no Israelis and that the Gaza-West Bank passageways, although open and monitored, are going to be open. National interest dictates the alternatives.. No one can say no to ending the occupation because if they do, they would be saying no to freedom."

-- "Real steps towards withdrawal"

Center-left, influential Arabic daily Al-Dustour (08/09) editorializes: "Those who are preparing to undertake protests and rejections with regard to the [Israeli] withdrawal [from Gaza] are truly the enemies of freedom.. Whether Netanyahu resigns from the Sharon government or thousands of Israeli protesters gather or hundreds of settlers refuse to leave the Palestinian lands, what is happening now constitutes real steps towards withdrawal, however the Israelis think about it. All we hope is that the Palestinians realize the value of this withdrawal and that they do not imitate the Israelis in their miscalculation of the meaning and importance of this gradual withdrawal from the land."

HALE